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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 3945
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2618
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 8334
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 3518
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 7751
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 000456

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SUBJECT: INDIAN EXPERTS VOICE CONCERN ABOUT MIDEAST AND
AFGHANISTAN

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Classified By: Classified by Political Counselor Ted Osius for reasons
1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a January 24th roundtable on the Middle East, aka &West Asia⁸, Indian experts and Emboffs and PolCouns discussed the U.S. and Indian roles in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Gulf. The Indian experts urged greater Washington engagement with Tehran, asserting a conflict would be devastating to the region. If Iranian President Ahmadinejad is left no room to maneuver on the nuclear issue, they maintained, he will become more of a hardliner. The experts expressed skepticism about proposed plans for a surge of US military forces in Iraq. The group observed that it is in the interest of all countries in the region to support Iraqi stability and reconstruction. Israel is seen as a valuable Indian ally because of long-standing defense cooperation. It was no surprise that Pakistan was seen by the group as a source of Afghanistan's woes. END SUMMARY.

-----A Gaggle of Grey-Beards-----

12. (C) Guests at a lunch hosted by the PolCouns included Ambassador R. M. Abhyankar, director of the Center for West Asian Studies at Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) and former Ministry of External Affairs Joint Secretary (East); Ambassador Hamid Ansari, Chair of the National Commission for Minorities and former Permanent Representative to the United Nations and Ambassador to Saudi Arabia; Mr. Qamar Agha, visiting professor at JMI, independent journalist, and friend of the late PLO leader Yassir Arafat; Dr. P. R. Kumaraswamy, associate professor at the School of International Studies of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and former research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement

of Peace in Jerusalem; Dr. Deba Prasad Nanda, associate professor at Delhi University and specialist on US foreign policy in West Asia; and Dr. Girijesh Pant, professor at JNU, s Center of West Asian Studies and director of the Center, s Gulf Studies Program. This roundtable is one of a series the Embassy has hosted to engage influential Indians on issues affecting top U.S policy priorities.

-----The US and Iran: Estranged Lovers?-----

¶3. (C) The experts encouraged Washington to engage Tehran. PolCouns emphasized that Washington had opened the door to talks with Tehran; the Secretary expressed her willingness to meet, but Iran spurred attempts at dialogue. Still, the experts urged that Washington be more flexible in the range of discussion topics. Ambassador Ansari asserted that Iran is about five years away from having nuclear weapons and argued that a closed door policy will not achieve U.S. objectives. "Even Israel talks to Iran," Ansari noted. Ambassador Ansari compared the relationship between the US and Iran to one between estranged lovers: "It is complex. There is resentment, but there is also a yearning to reconcile." Tehran wants to talk with Washington, he said, but not on terms of surrender. Dr. Kumaraswamy picked up the point, noting that there is a lot of baggage in the relationship and that a third party is needed to mediate. PolCouns pointed out that Iran's rhetoric revealed a dreadful lack of concern for the security of the region; including Israel. He added that, to make any progress with Iran, the US needs the continued support of the international community, especially Iran's neighbors--and especially India.

¶4. (C) Dr. Pant rejected the notion that Ahmadinejad does not have the space to be less hardline and opined, "If he is pushed, he will become more extreme. Iran has economic

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problems, including unemployment and inflation. Iran needs oil sector investment. The US must give Ahmadinejad room to bargain." Ambassador Ansari and Mr. Agha asserted that the post-1991 US policy of dual containment (sic) had not worked.

Mr. Agha cautioned against forcing regime change in Iran, saying it would destabilize the entire region. "The world can change quickly. Iran could change quickly. No one saw the Iranian revolution happening a year before. There was also little indication that Ahmadinejad would beat former President Rafsanjani to win the Iranian presidential election," noted Ambassador Ansari. Ambassador Abhyankar discussed the tension between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani. He cautioned against creating a common enemy to divert attention away from Iran's internal tensions. "The US should let events run their course," he observed.

-----Iran and Syria: Can They Really Help in Iraq?-----

¶5. (C) Ambassador Abhyankar asserted that, if the US would talk to Iran, it would get rid of one of the problems in Iraq. He assessed that the U.S. needs contributions from all nations in West Asia to be successful in Iraq, including Iran and the Gulf states. He posited that West Asia would respond to a U.S. dialogue with Iran by participating more in the Iraq effort. However, Dr. Kumaraswamy warned that engaging with Iran and Syria presupposed that they would be able to help in Iraq, underlining that "It is easier for them to create trouble than to stop it." While the experts agreed that most Iraqis wanted to engage Iran, few wanted to follow Iran, as "Iraqis do not want to trade the yoke of Saddam Hussein for the yoke of Tehran."

-----Iraq: Military Option No Solution-----

¶6. (C) Ambassador Ansari judged that the proposed surge in US military forces to Iraq will do little to quell the violence as it does not address the root of the problem. He emphasized that, "There is no question about US military supremacy, but a military solution is not what is called

for." He also conjectured that the plan for a surge would make things difficult for "Washington,s friends." Dr. Pant noted that the war has ravaged Iraq,s educational institutions and that the requisite intellectual capital needed for nation-building has fled. The experts agreed that "brain drain" was a major problem, and Ambassador Ansari added that "no real reconstruction can take place until that talent feels secure enough to come back to the country." Dr. Pant remarked that it would be permissible to allow Iraq to dissolve and for Kurdistan to become independent, but Ambassador Abhyankar waved off the proposition, warning it would create more conflict within the region. PolCouns re-stated the President's strategy in Iraq, and described U.S. capacity-building efforts, most notably at local levels through Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and urged India to do more to help.

-----India Gets What It Wants From Israel-----

¶7. (C) While addressing the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Ambassador Ansari cited Gandhi,s position that 'the problems of one persecuted people cannot be solved by persecuting another people', i.e. the Palestinians. He stated that, "most Indians accept that Israel exists, but they do not think that an expanded Israel is legitimate." Ambassador Abhiyankar noted that some Indians think India should not have relations with Israel but New Delhi counters those arguments by stating that India has a robust defense relationship with Israel and gets what it wants from the relationship. He articulated that, "India gets things from Israel (defense technology) that no other country is willing

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to provide." He also relayed that, "No one is offering India a nuclear umbrella, so India has to take care of itself. The security of over a billion people is at stake. That will always be the top priority of any Indian administration."

-----No Peace in Afghanistan Without Pakistan's Assistance-----

¶8. (C) After Ambassador Ansari noted that Afghanistan is becoming less stable, the conversation quickly turned to Pakistan. Although President Karzai is considered a friend to India, he is ineffective, bemoaned Ansari. He also pointed the finger at Pakistani ISI elements for continued problems in southern Afghanistan. Ambassador Abhyankar offered little hope of improvement from Pakistan, citing Pakistani President Musharraf,s claim that he cannot control his territory and, in his view, the inability of the US to conduct open operations within Pakistan. Ambassador Ansari declared that, "Musharraf is skilled in the art of survival. The U.S. needs him but cannot pressure him." PolCouns pointed out that, as Indian officials often tell us, public pressure tends to be counter-productive, and added that we continue to rely on Pakistan's key role in the GWOT.

-----Frustration Growing in the Middle East-----

¶10. (C) Ambassadors Abhyankar and Ansari noted that, since the war in Lebanon and the unrest among Palestinians, there is an increasing sense of frustration among the people on the street in places like Damascus and Cairo. "More women have donned the hijab and more young people are wasting their time smoking hookahs," Ambassador Abhyankar asserted. "These are the only avenues they feel they have to express their frustrations." However, Ambassador Abhyankar claimed that all of the Gulf countries were friendly to India. He noted that India has over 3.5 million non-resident Indians (NRIs) working and living in the region. Despite their numbers, the NRI population had little influence over India,s policy toward the Gulf, Ambassador Abhyankar disingenuously claimed, as well as little sway in politics back home because, compared to the rest of India,s population, they are a relatively small percentage. Ambassador Ansari and Mr. Agha did point out, however, that disturbances in the Gulf harmed

India because of the Gulf,s prominent place as an oil supplier and trade partner.

-----Mideast as a Domestic Issue-----

¶11. (C) COMMENT: These experts gave us a snapshot of how India views its western flank, but they gave short shrift to the biggest factor of all: the role India's politically influential Muslim vote bloc has in keeping India from plunging too deeply into the Middle East's problems. One expert warned that Indian politicians must be careful when playing the Muslim card for electoral gain. Because Muslims in politically significant Uttar Pradesh are currently split between three major parties in a close race, it is near certain that some politicians will attempt to exploit Muslim sentiments, especially those of the vulnerable Shia minority.

India's Iran policy, therefore, is as much an emotional issue with domestic ramifications as an interest-based foreign policy matter. Hence, it is not surprising that Foreign Minister Mukherjee's planned February trip to Iran has received considerable, and favorable, notice in the media. END COMMENT.

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